

At Conference, Exploring What It Means to Be Arab American

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Fouad Ashkar brought the youngest of his four sons from [Detroit](#) to Washington this weekend to attend a convention of Arab Americans and to "learn about the issues affecting us as Arab Americans."

Rami, who is 14 and was born in the [United States](#), told his Lebanese-born father that he had not encountered any problems so far in his life.

"Not even in Ramadan?" the 58-year-old Ashkar asked incredulously, referring to the holy month when Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset. "You feel comfortable telling people, 'I am Muslim and Arab?' "

When Rami replied that he did indeed feel comfortable acknowledging his identity, his father replied: "I disagree. Especially when it comes to culture and religion issues."

Their different takes on what it is like being an Arab American in a post-Sept. 11 world reflect a dichotomy experienced by many of the roughly 1,000 people attending the conference sponsored by the American-Arab Anti Discrimination Committee. They spoke of having to face stereotypes of Arabs as terrorists. Some have pondered anglicizing their names. Yet they also spoke of feeling at home in a country that gives them the freedom to live as they wish.

"We kind of feel like we live a dual life," said Lena Seikaly, a 21-year-old musician from the District. "There is the American life in the interaction with friends and colleagues in school and with the neighbors, and there is our Arab life back home with our families and heritage."

According to the Arab American Institute, at least 3.5 million Americans are of Arab descent. The largest concentrations live in [Michigan](#) and California.

Seikaly was one of four panelists who discussed what it is like "growing up Arab American," as the discussion was named. It was dedicated to students at [Virginia Tech](#) who were killed by a fellow student in April. Some of the dead were of Arab origin.

The panel was one of many scheduled during the four-day convention, which ends tomorrow and is being held at the Omni Shoreham hotel. The convention's theme,

"Toward a More Perfect Union," reflects the success with which most Arab Americans have assimilated in the United States.

"Being Arab American is just like being American or any other ethnicity," said panelist George Salim, a policy adviser for the [Department of Homeland Security](#). "It is just a little bit better," he added, prompting chuckles in the audience.

After the 2001 attacks on the [World Trade Center](#) and [the Pentagon](#), Arabs in the United States worried about the impact of stereotypes. Passing through airport security has become so onerous for many Arab Americans that several comics at the convention said the experience had become a standard part of their repertoire.

Several people at the convention said some Arab Americans decide to change their names in hopes that it will make their lives easier.

"I would implore you to not even think about changing your name," Salim told a young woman in the audience who asked for his advice. "It's unique. It gives you something you are proud of."

Salim suggested that Arab Americans can maintain their identities while simultaneously integrating into society. He suggested one way to build bridges is to participate in activities that are quintessentially American.

"We don't only do things that are Arab," he said. "We do things that are American."